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WORLD NEWS

Zaire's Mobutu: Self-Made Ruler

Enforcer of Unity Has Become One of World's Wealthiest Men

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KINSHASA, Zaire—Popular discontent with this nation's authoritarian government generally seethes like a caged lion—threatening but harmless. But things threatened to get out of hand earlier this year when workers at Zaire's state-owned transportation company staged a wildcat strike to demand a wage increase.

Support for the illegal walkout seemed to be growing, as did the crowds that daily gathered ominously outside company headquarters.

That's when President Mobutu Sese Seko stepped in. "Le Guide," one of the many honorifics Mobutu likes to be known by, called a meeting with union leaders and strike organizers to discuss their grievances. He played the role of friendly mediator rather than lifetime ruler, sometimes listening patiently, sometimes cajoling, sometimes cracking jokes in native dialect.

Then at the end of the all-day, televised session, he called forth the company's white Belgian director, tongue-lashed him for allegedly misleading workers about promised wage increases and dismissed him on the spot. The crowd roared—and left satisfied, although empty-handed. The strike was over.

"It was part African palaver, part showmanship and part flimflam," said a diplomat who watched. And, another added, "real genius."

It was also an object lesson in how former Army sergeant Mobutu, now 54, has managed to survive for 20 years atop one of Africa's shakiest thrones. As this performance suggests, Mobutu has had the cunning to deflect the blame for unpopular policies and to manipulate potent symbols—in this case, the symbol of the evil European businessman who deceives Africans. He is also adept at meting out gifts to loyal retainers and dividing and coopting potential opponents.

Only a few years ago, Mobutu's grip, looked tentative, and analysts were comparing him to the shah of Iran. Beset by a precipitous economic decline and two major insur-

gencies in mineral-rich Shaba province backed by Marxist neighbor Angola, Le Guide looked to many to be ready for forced retirement to one of the fortified chalets he keeps in Europe. A 1978 assessment by the U.S. Embassy here gave him five years at most.

Seven years later he shows no sign of imminent departure. A semblance of economic recovery has begun. Although there have been minor incidents of revolt, his Army appears stronger and more loyal than ever. Even his most bitter opponents here concede his overthrow has become a more distant if still tangible possibility.

Like the continent that spawned him, Mobutu is intuitive, extravagant, spontaneous and, above all, self-made. Part actor, part statesman, part gangster, he has risen from poverty to become one of the world's wealthiest men. He has created his own myth, his own symbols of power, even his own name—Mobutu Sese Seko means "Mobutu himself forever."

Posters bearing his bemused countenance and leopardskin cap are everywhere, in hotel lobbies and on city streets, along with slogans of self-adulation such as the equation "Mobutu + the people = one."

Mobutu likes to portray himself as the kind, forgiving father of a large and unruly family, and he is seldom given to humility. In his inaugural speech last December marking the start of his third seven-year term as president, a post he created for himself in 1970, Mobutu spoke piously of "the high degree of confidence, of loyalty, of esteem and of love" he enjoyed from his people.

"If there exist on this planet men who profoundly know their country and their people," he intoned, "I can say without any pretense that I am one of them."

His self-professed piety is easy to ridicule, as are the "Mobutu suits" that are required wear among top government officials, the ban against western suits and ties and the requirement that each Zairian be addressed by the French Revolution title of "citizen." Mobutu at

one time even sought to ban the celebration of Christmas, arguing it was not a genuine African holiday.

Last year's national election, in which Le Guide claimed to have won 99.16 percent of the vote, seemed more an exercise in self-parody than a demonstration of popular support.

Still, the ridicule tends to conceal Mobutu's essential achievement: He has not only survived, he has enforced unity upon a widely disparate nation of 32 million people and 200 tribes that before he took power were mired in regional and ethnic conflict.

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When Zaire—then the Belgian Congo—gained independence in 1960, Mobutu—then Joseph Mobutu—was an Army sergeant, with much ambition but little education and no money. He bided his time, cutting deals with opponents, seizing the rank of general, establishing early contacts with operatives of the Central Intelligence Agency and others who later helped him to the top.

More than 100,000 people were killed during those first years of freedom, and by 1964, 13 of the country's 21 provinces were in revolt. In November 1965 Mobutu stepped in, overthrowing a fragile civilian government. He has been there ever since and now ranks as one of Africa's senior statesmen.

He has stayed on top in part because he controls the flow of funds in one of Africa's potentially richest nations. From the beginning he used Zaire's vast mineral wealth as his personal preserve. He built 11 personal palaces and countless monuments to himself and his late mother.

Those who go along not only gain political prestige but vast wealth as well, and ostentation has become a national pastime among the new elite. "Zaire's gotta be great—I've never seen so many Mercedes," remarked Muhammad Ali in 1974 when he came to Kinshasa to fight George Foreman in a publicly financed \$15 million extravaganza.

Dissenters are harshly punished with jail or exile, but Mobutu often prefers to treat opponents as recalcitrant offspring who can be tempted or bullied to return to the family fold. Last year, for instance, he presided over a joint press conference during which he was endorsed for reelection by four former legislators who were among a group of 13 jailed a year earlier for seeking to establish an opposition political party.

"The chief can punish, but the chief should also know how to pardon," said Mobutu in his reinauguration speech. "In a family, a difficult child despite all remains a child of the family."

Mobutu also likes to shuffle political allies like playing cards. Cabinet shakeups are frequent—there already have been three since his

latest inauguration in December. Five regional governorships have changed hands, six senior Army generals have been compelled to retire, and a new inspector general has been appointed to keep tighter watch on the military. The only real surprise was that Mobutu retained as prime minister Kengo wa Donde,

who has now held that post for 2½ years—a record under Le Guide.

Consistency is not Mobutu's most prominent trait. He speaks of the need for African "authenticity" and for Africans to cast aside the bonds of "neocolonialism," yet Zaire is one of white-ruled South Africa's top African trading partners.

Western estimates of Mobutu's personal wealth run as high as \$4 billion. Irwin Blumenthal, a West German banking executive who spent a brief and unhappy tenure here as director of the Bank of Zaire in the late 1970s on assignment for the International Monetary Fund, estimated Mobutu owned five Belgian chateaus, seven office buildings and houses in France, Switzerland and Italy. Lately, diplomats here say, he has taken a liking to Portugal and has purchased a chateau and a vineyard there.

Besides acquiring his own billions, Mobutu has created an atmosphere in which public theft is considered not only necessary but admirable. Mobutu himself seems ambivalent toward the matter, sug-

gesting publicly on one occasion that "discreet theft" was the key to success on Zaire. On another, he took the opposite position, complaining that "our society risks losing its political character to become one vast marketplace ruled by the basest laws of traffic and exploitation."

Lately, however, Le Guide has been showing signs of genuine acceptance of a western-dictated economic reform program. While some analysts doubt that he will stay the course, others believe Mobutu has decided that he wants to leave a more impressive legacy than that of the man who single-handedly despoiled Zaire.

Still others believe Le Guide is growing weary of the burden of governing the ungovernable. He is said to spend much of his time either in his ancestral home of Gbadolite in northeastern Zaire, where he maintains a country palace and huge farming estate staffed with Israeli advisers, or in Europe.

Stories circulate in this capital that he is suffering from leukemia or some other fatal disorder and that he undergoes total blood transfusions every six months at a secluded Swiss health clinic.

But the rumors appear to be mostly wishful thinking on the part of those who would like to see Le Guide make an early departure from his throne. Diplomats who have regular contact with him say Mobutu looks reasonably healthy and vigorous. He gave his four-hour inaugural speech last December without stopping for either water or a rest, although he had to be escorted from the podium afterward.

The biggest anxiety among some analysts is the question of who will replace Mobutu when the inevitable time comes. Many expect the Army will have the final say, as it did when Mobutu seized power. But others fear chaos.

"He has carefully avoided grooming a successor, and there are few men cunning or ruthless enough to fill his shoes," one diplomat said. "This country has been held together largely by the force of his personality and willpower, and when he goes no one knows what could happen."